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University of North Alabama

**The University of North Alabama College of Business and Technology:**

**Guiding the Region into the Digital Economy**

**Innovative Strategy or Program:** A town and gown strategy started in 2014 has brought many benefits to the students, faculty, and staff at the University of North Alabama (UNA), accelerated entrepreneurship, and increased the value the region places on a UNA college degree. Employing a process methodology called *Strategic Doing*, the team has sustained and improved the region’s ability to increase the availability of high paying jobs and made the region more desirable to students. The program demonstrates how starting one project and using a guided team can lead to significant change in a rural community.

In late 2013, UNA selected Dr. Gregory Carnes to be the fifth Dean of the College of Business (COB). Dean Carnes is the Raburn Eminent Scholar and a sought-out expert on tax accounting. He entered the role knowing that the college was halfway into their initial AACSB accreditation journey, which would be completed within his first three years.

Dean Carnes set priorities for the college that included a stronger and more inclusive relationship with the surrounding region. He began by hiring and organizing an internal team with whom he built a collaboration with local businesses, government, and nonprofit leaders. One initiative was to build a core team focused on realigning the region’s job priorities with the COB college graduates’ capabilities. This work was supported by a 2015 economic study that highlighted how the region had a gap in the high growth/high paying jobs of the digital knowledge economy.

Dean Carnes initiated a small team that began what has grown into the *Shoals Shift* project, which focused on encouraging digital transformation in the region through competitions, trainings, and engagement. This work during 2014-2018 moved the region in the desired direction. The project continues, and since 2018 more initiatives have been undertaken.

**2. Societal Impact of the Strategy or Program including Major initiatives since 2018:**

Listed below are several of the projects the Shoals Shift program has created or participated in that are adding jobs, capital, and assets to enhance the region’s competitiveness and build a stronger college.

1. Renaming the COB as **College of Business and Technology** (COBT): This change, approved by the UNA Board of Trustees in 2021, solidifies the changing nature of the programs offered by the COB to include the technology offerings of information systems, data analytics, and computer science. One benefit is stronger student recruiting.
2. **Office of Regional Engagement**: In 2019, the Provost initiated a project to leverage outreach across colleges with an economic development scope. This has resulted in the COBT collaborating with a wide range of UNA programs, including the College of Arts, Sciences and Engineering (CASE), the Institute for Innovation and Economic Development, the Small Business Development Center, the Center for Learning and Professional Development, the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area, and the Mitchell-West Center for Social Inclusion. This work raises the visibility of the university’s capabilities to be a community partner for good. The group’s current projects include:
	1. The **Black Business Expo** brought a diverse group together for a first-time event. Through bank foundations and local company funding, the COBT coordinated this event. COBT faculty also provided training in digital skills to the participating businesses. Over 100 exhibitors and more than 3,500 participants attended this event on August 22, 2021. The program was well received, and plans are underway to continue.
	2. Recently the group was named a 2021 recipient of the **Appalachian Teaching Project** from the Appalachian Regional Commission (1 of 17 selected and 1 of 3 new to the program). The winning proposal is an interdisciplinary course led by faculty from UNA’s COBT and CASE, focused on encouraging collaboration across disciplines to identify creative economic opportunities connected to local recreation. Students work with local tourism groups to recommend actions.
3. **Remote Shoals**: In 2019, the Shoals Economic Development Authority (SEDA) created a remote worker attraction program inspired by a UNA COBT graduate who is on their board. Working with *Shoals Shift*, the program in its third year has attracted numerous tech workers to the area. Over 50 workers and their families have moved to the region.
4. **Business Attraction**: In 2018-19 SEDA undertook a digital company attraction program which led the COBT to build a **Computer Science/Information Systems (CSIS) growth plan**. The University is investing in a new 45,000 square foot building to house CSIS and Mathematics programs. The State of Alabama, recognizing UNA’s focus on workforce development, has provided $15M of funding for the building, and local governments and SEDA are funding the remaining $8M.
5. **Institute Fellows**: Started in 2016, this unique program allows students to work on a project for a company off-site and on a flexible schedule, so they do not have to be in person or leave an already paying part-time job. The student is paid through a grant, so the employer incurs no expense. Over 70 students have participated and over 40 jobs were supported by these efforts. The employer receives completion of a project they likely would have been unable to finish alone. This award-winning project has been selected as a Regional Best Practice and is a finalist for the **Governor’s Work-based Learning Program Award** in 2021 and was a finalist for the **University Economic Development Association Award for Innovation + Talent** in 2019.
6. **Agile Strategies Connecting Enterprises to New Demand (ASCEND)** project: In 2019, the COBT collaborated with the Shoals Business Incubator to obtain a Rural Business Development Grant from USDA that supports local company training. The ASCEND project’s scope enhanced the use of broadband and technology strategies in the management, promotions, and operations of selected small businesses. This project included three main interconnected activities focused on building the businesses’ ability to grow sales and jobs ̶ a Broadband Business Bootcamp, a Strategic Doing - 10 Skills for Agile Leadership class, and the UNA Institute Fellows Project. Ten businesses successfully participated in the ASCEND project.

**Description of applicability or transferability to other institutions:** The collaboration and adherence to the Strategic Doing methodology have exposed the region and UNA to deeper and more sustainable initiatives that greatly enhance the region’s competitiveness. The opportunities to work together for the mutual benefit have had a positive economic impact on the region. Other universities may replicate this initiative using applicable local partners and assets. The key is starting with a strong core team and completing projects to build strength in the team’s collaboration. Any region, rural or urban, can learn the value of collaboration using this prescribed method that allows the team to build a strong sustainable culture of change, and how linking and leveraging early successes leads to larger opportunities.